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Can we teach advertising students to think? Strategies to engage student thinking

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ABSTRACT

Understanding and effectively managing students' engagement in education plays a significant role in enhancing learning processes and outcomes. Research has shown that students learn more when they are actively engaged in their learning. However, as many educators know, this is not as easy as one might expect. Using a range of teaching approaches, we attempt to impart knowledge and develop understanding and comprehension (Angelo 1993; Biggs and Telfer 1987; Patti 2003; Ranburuth and McCormick 2001). These vary from "information dump" or teacher-centric approaches, to those that stimulate more active involvement. From the literature, we know that experiential learning, such as those strategies that help students acquire practice skills, apply critical thought and active learning, are likely to have achieve higher levels of intellectual skill and ability (Benson and Blackman 2003; Hampton and Lawrence 1995; Hopkinson and Hogg 2004; Kolb 1984).

This paper presents a case example of strategies incorporated into what is sometimes considered a dull delivery mode—the large-lecture environment—intended to capture the interest of students by engaging student thinking and reflection. The study illustrates a significant way for universities to respond to increasing demand for delivery efficiency while maintaining high quality learning outcomes. Thus, in order to achieve objectives of large lecture economies, learning engagement strategies were trialed in one undergraduate and two graduate classes at a Brisbane-based university.

More specifically, the learning engagement strategies consisted of how content discussed in the lectures could relate to assessment. Intervention exercises were introduced during the lectures to provide value in the mass-learning environment that went above and beyond what the PowerPoint slides could offer. The exercises were developed to encourage students to actively participate, engage and reflect upon the lecture content, as part of the lecture process. These activities were developed to encourage students to begin thinking about the content of the lecture, give them the opportunity to evaluate what the key outcomes of the lecture and also interact with other students. The effectiveness of these activities was evaluated at the end of the semester and the extent to which a clearer understanding of the content was developed and enhanced students' learning experience. Perceived effectiveness of different teaching techniques was also evaluated with a focus on specific engagement tactics.

The results indicated that while some trends show a push toward online and distance education delivery, the majority of students tested in this research reported a strong preference away from these approaches, favoring traditional teaching models. This suggests enduring value is seen in traditional forms, particularly where students are better involved and engaged in the learning process. The learning engagement strategies introduced in this study gave students the opportunity to see how their understanding of the content may be assessed while reinforcing key points of the lecture, as well as offering additional value to those who attended the lecture beyond what was available to them online. The aim of these activities was not only to engage the students during the lecture and encourage active thinking about the content, but also to enhance their skills and knowledge for exam preparation. The researchers found that there was a considerable improvement in the exam result for graduate students in the semester where the teaching strategies were implemented, whereas undergraduate results remained constant.

In summary, this small, quantitative case study attempts to provide some insight into the perceptions of students and the extent to which their performance in a subject is influenced by their own approach to learning and studying. Findings show that, even though there is a trend towards online teaching and learning, a place still exists for the large lecture format. More importantly, it brings to light the merit of specific strategies that facilitate active participation (engagement) to enhance learning outcomes teaching in large lectures in higher education. These outcomes provide valuable signposts for educators that will help not only help short-term goals, such as performance in subjects undertaken, but provide long-term benefits for graduates who will be better prepared for the realities of the real world.

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